

Interview with Benjamin H. Read

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

UNDER SECRETARY BENJAMIN H. READ

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: March 30, 1990

Copyright 1998 ADST

Q: Today is March 30, 1990. This is an interview with Under Secretary Benjamin H. Read at his home. I wonder if you could give me a little of your background, sort of where did you come from?

READ: I am a Pennsylvanian. Grew up near Philadelphia. Went into the Marine Corps when I got out of school. And served in the Pacific and China. After that period, I got home in '46, went to Williams College, graduated there in 1949, went to law school at the University of Pennsylvania and graduated in '52. I had four years first in the general law practice, and then as public defender in Philadelphia and came down to be an international lawyer in the State Department in '57.

Q: What got you into this international lawyer mode?

READ: I guess the early experience with the world as a young Marine when I had seen China at a very interesting time.

Q: So you'd actually gone with the Marines into China?

Library of Congress

READ: Yes, I spent a year in the North China area. In the State Department Legal Adviser's Office, I was an associate adviser for about a year and a half, in which I was assigned to research and develop positions for the first Law of the Seas Conference in the post-war period in 1958. I went to that conference and served under Arthur Dean who was the chairman of the delegation. After coming back, I went to the Hill for almost 6 years as a legislative assistant to Senator Clark from Pennsylvania. And then I came back to the Department as Executive Secretary in 1963. I had known Luke Battle who had been a predecessor there. I stayed for 6 years as special assistant to the Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Executive Secretary of the Department. In 1969, I left to become the first head of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which was just being chartered. In 1973 I became the first head of the German Marshall Fund. And then back to the Department in the Carter period as the Under Secretary for Management from 1977-81. Since then my contacts with foreign affairs have been limited to occasional projects.

Q: I'd like to return...I ask this because I started at Williams the same time in 1946, and was not a veteran at that time. They caught me later on. Was that sort of your field?

READ: I majored in Political Economy which was Fred Shuman and Emille Dupre, a marvelous doubleheader. They were both people who were quite familiar with the world in different ways.

Q: Going to the time you were in the legal advisers' office. How did you find...you were there from '57 to '58. Did you get much of a feel for the rest of the legal advisers' office at that time and how did it operate and how did the lawyers intermingle with the Foreign Service?

READ: I got quite familiar with that. It was headed when I got there, if my recollection is correct, by Herman Phleger who was a very close friend of John Foster Dulles. He had excellent entree.

Library of Congress

Q: He sat in all the Secretary's staff meetings if I recall, and had tremendous influence with Dulles.

READ: Dulles being a lawyer, knew and respected Phelger as a lawyer and used him in many different ways. He was succeeded by a man named Becker if I recall. He did not have that sort of access. The Legal Adviser's Office consisted of about 50 lawyers at that time, set up to reflect a mini breakdown of the State Department. It had geographic and functional positions, with 3 or 4 lawyers in each division, who served their respective bureaus. In some cases they were very closely connected with the bureaus because of the institutional memory that many of them represented for a passing parade of Foreign Service Officers coming into the bureaus who might not know all the precedents on Berlin or whatever the issue might have been. They were frequently a resource of considerable importance. Obviously that varied with the caliber of the people and the personal chemistry between them and the heads of bureaus. There were some specialists. I remember a woman named Marjorie Whiteman who put out that enormous...

Q: ...book on International Law.

READ: A huge set of references to the diplomatic papers of the period as they related to the development of International Law. I was quite fortunate in one way because the first post-war Law of the Seas conference in 1958 was about a year off when I joined the Legal Adviser's Office. I was quite early on seized with that issue, and told to run with it. And from zero basic knowledge built up a fair background on the issues that had been thoroughly discussed at the Hague Convention in the thirties and the conversations with the other agencies which had heavy involvement in the Law of the Seas. I started developing position papers and kept looking around for more senior people who knew more about the subject and didn't find them. So many of these position papers found their way into the U.S. position at the conference.

Library of Congress

Q: I can't help making an aside. I remember Fred Shuman's course where we were going back to the Franco Prussian wars seemed to have established some of the precedents that we were using at least in the forties.

READ: That's modern precedent compared to what we were looking at. We were looking at the 16th century Dutch gunshot range as the limit of the three mile territorial sea.

Q: What were we after in our delegation? What were the issues and what were we after?

READ: The U.S. Navy had a very heavy interest, exaggerated in my view, about the importance of the three mile limit. A number of countries were then establishing 12 mile limits hither and yon around the globe. And it was an issue of great importance in terms of territorial waters around islands. The Quemoy Matsu, the off-shore China islands were in the center of controversies as were Persian Gulf island issues where inevitably you have vast undersea resource claims. Other islands just appear at certain times of the year. But the primary interests were the width of the territorial seas, rights of navigation, and delineation of bays where countries like Libya claim as a bay what is just a dip in the Mediterranean coast line. The deep sea bottoms were beginning to look interesting because of nuggets of scarce metal content that had recently been found just in the deeps of the Pacific—zinc, manganese, copper etc. It was beyond the capabilities of almost everyone at that point to have a practical means of mining, exploiting and marketing that, but it was a future glint in the eye of a lot of developed countries particularly and the developing countries were fearful of being deprived of their “common heritage.”

Q: Were we under instructions to make sure that we were going to be able to get to this potential source?

READ: Yes. That was one of the objectives. Fisheries was another in hot dispute because of the historic claims of the U.S. fishermen in other parts of the world and vice versa.

Library of Congress

Q: How did it come out? From the American point of view?

READ: We failed in getting the sufficient number of votes required. I've forgotten whether it was two-thirds or half majority on the territorial sea width of 3 miles. There were any number of countries that had broken the line and they were not about to roll back. We preserved the U.S. position on deep sea mining, and as I recall it, the fisheries came out rather well. There was agreement on perhaps 40 or 50 articles which are now part of accepted international law of the seas. Of course, this was a subject of extended negotiations after that right up through the beginning of the Reagan period.

Q: Well, in your working, how did you find...was there a lot of horse- trading with the different delegations? We were sort of number 1 in all sorts of things. Were we able to throw our weight around? How did you all work?

READ: Yes, the U.S. had a very heavy voice in these negotiations and there were some automatic followers, but it was anything but unanimous. There were issues in which country interests were very different. There were some very peculiar lineups because of geography, or because of coastal state position on straits.

Q: Did you come back saying that we got about as much as we could have?

READ: More or less. No one was fully satisfied.

Q: Probably the best way for any set of negotiations to come out. You left in 1958 and became legislative assistant to Senator Clark. He was Senator from Pennsylvania. Did you have much dealing with the State Department in that position?

READ: Yes, some. I remember Joe was not then a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, but aspired to be. He had a very close relationship with an elderly cousin in his family, Grenville Clark, who, with Louis Sohn, a member of the Harvard Law School faculty, had written a book called "World Peace Through World Law" It was a model code

Library of Congress

for what the UN might be as opposed to what it was. Joe got very interested in promoting these issues and a variety of other specific foreign affairs issues that arose. I was following those matters for him.

Q: What was the feeling...here is an important Senator at the time, towards something such as the United Nations?

READ: Well, he was a strong staunch supporter, as I think anyone who lived through World War II. Its limitations were certainly becoming obvious at that point, but he felt that our country ought to use the United Nation mechanisms more than it did.

Q: What was your impression of how the State Department operated with Congress? What was the interface like?

READ: Well, let's see, Thruston Morton was the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations at the time. Later, or before he had been the Senator from Kentucky. He was followed by Bill Macomber, who became a good friend.

Q: Who had himself been a Legislative Assistant to Dulles.

READ: The Congressional Relations bureau was very helpful in a variety of things. It was a cordial relationship, and the Department looked competent to this young legislative aide at that point. Little did I know.

Q: Well, let's come to that. In 1963, already two years into the Kennedy Administration, you became the Executive Secretary in the State Department. How did that job come about?

READ: I think it was probably through Luke Battle, as prior Executive Secretary, more than anyone else. We had gotten to know each other during the Kennedy campaign in 1960, and through social relationship. He became the Assistant Secretary for Cultural Affairs and was succeeded by Bill Brubeck. He was there for about a year and was about to go

Library of Congress

to the White House when I arrived first as the Deputy Executive Secretary and then was Executive Secretary. I was anything but well equipped to do that job at the time. I was glad I had a short two or three month period as Deputy, because it was a massive learning job. Having to learn all about the Department and its particulars rather than the more formal view of earlier days.

Q: What was the job?

READ: The office, as you may know, was set up by George Marshall when he was Secretary of State. He came over from his well-ordered days as Chief of Staff in World War II and was appalled by seeing Assistant Secretaries run into his room with pieces of a problem where another piece from another part of the Department wouldn't be presented at the same time. There was no sense of priorities, no appropriate follow-up. And so he set up the Executive Secretariat which had grown considerably in the intervening years between the late '40s when Dean Rusk happened to be Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and prior to that Far East. It attempted to be several things. It made sure all aspects of a problem were presented at the same time. It presented the issues to be dealt with to the Secretary and the Under Secretaries with some sense of priorities of the importance of the issues. It coordinated the relationships between the Bureaus and the Assistant Secretaries and the Secretary of State in terms of the paper flow as well as the demands of the Secretary on the Department. Seeing that they were dealt with in time. It staffed the Secretary of State whenever he traveled with the help of trunks of documents in those pre-computer days and assured the availability of materials which might be necessary to draw on. It had the formal assignment of providing relationships for probably 95% of the paper that flowed between the White House, the State Department, and between the State Department and other agencies of the government. And so it was a many-sided thing. The operation center had been set up a year or two earlier after a fiasco in South America preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis. And that was under the wing of the Executive Secretary.

Library of Congress

Q: Do you remember what the fiasco was?

READ: Yes, a ship had gone through the Panama Canal, and as I remember there was some crisis going on with Brazil. Kennedy asked, "Where is the ship?" Nobody could answer. It was just that sort of thing that triggered the Department to set up a full time around-the-clock operations center to track such things and that was done. It was a 24-hour watch system when I got there. In the six years I was there we added military officers and a variety of capabilities such as the very first FAX machine in Washington. It was between the State Department and the White House, established as a result of being unable to get papers through the crowds on the night of the Kennedy assassination. It was a terrible embarrassment. People were 12 deep around the White House grounds and you couldn't get through. Messengers weren't making it. So we installed this early encryption-decryption FAX machine which took about 30 seconds to get a page over, which was a revolutionary improvement.

Q: Obviously the Secretary during all this time was Secretary Rusk. What was your impression of him and as he related to your work? Or what he demanded of you?

READ: I remember when I became Executive Secretary he said, "I want you to be the traffic cop on this floor for all the paper flow between me and the Department, and the Department and all the other agencies." I didn't begin to comprehend how broad that task was until some hard lessons had been learned. He realized from his first two years on the job that the ability of the Secretary of State to manage the Department is very limited. Obviously the Secretaries of State are spREAD so thin in terms of their demands of the Hill, travel, the President, it's impossible for them to do the usual managerial task of making sure the problems come up through the system when they should, and get decided below him when they should, or implemented once he's made them. He realized that very fully and the objective was to give him both the highest priority problems, and in

Library of Congress

correct order and, of course, that is an ever changing kaleidoscope. And to make sure the decisions aren't lost in the shuffle.

Q: What was he like to work for?

READ: Rusk was a person who, when you first went to work for him as I did with no background, appeared very cold, aloof and removed. He had a very strong sense of self discipline. George Marshall was his model. It was a difficult period for him, his early Secretaryship. He was a person of extraordinary integrity and professional capability that I came to admire and appreciate more and more and more. He could condense complex issues into comprehensible shorthand in terms of his discourse with the foreign ambassadors and foreign ministers who came through as well or better than anybody I know. And there have been some masters of that game as you well know before and since. There was a respect for him in the diplomatic corps which was genuine and very deep seated. He was a person of absolutely impeccable integrity. Unlike some of his successors he never met himself coming around the corner, as has happened in the more recent past. His public statements and his private statements were just as close as could be. He was always terribly aware that he was speaking to two or three or more audiences; the domestic audience, the foreign audience, the Congress and the administration. He was aware that if you provide daylight between those roles your credibility is going to suffer. You are going to get hurt and be ineffective. He had a very strong sense of his overriding obligation to the President. Never to his most intimate colleagues did he show the hand that he was going to recommend to the President, or relate in detail his conversations with the President. He was an extraordinary fellow. Ed Newman of CBS has just taped 12 hours of conversation with him within the past year which the University should have if it doesn't (it probably does), of his recollections of early childhood, Rhodes Scholarship from pea patch poor Georgia background, to principal staff job of the China-Burma-India theater in World War II, to the Rockefeller Foundation, to the surprise invitation by Kennedy to

Library of Congress

become Secretary of State. And, of course, he served longer than anybody except Cordell Hull. Eight full years which is backbreaking.

Q: You mentioned that you learned the hard way some of the problems. I wonder if maybe you could tell one or two of these problems because they often illustrate just how the guts of foreign policy is developed? Or how papers go around?

READ: I remember in the early period Assistant Secretaries might get a call from the then expanded NSC Staff under Mac Bundy. There were some very strong and capable people there with first rate intellects. They would agree to do something in their telephone conversations. The Assistant Secretaries would have to get Departmental clearance on the cable if it had wider than their immediate concern, or they'd do so at their peril. So they'd have to get a Secretariat or SS clearance on things they'd sent out. But frequently, I remember one or two egregious cases when Assistant Secretaries would try to bull such matters through, saying "the White House wants this out immediately." You had to learn to ask who is the White House, and you'd find it was a Deputy Assistant four notches down from the top talking to a junior staff man on the NSC who didn't speak for anybody but himself. You learned to say hold your horses, I've got to clear this with the White House at a higher level, or I want the Secretary to see this, or not see it. You get fooled on that sort of thing only once or twice. Roger Hilsman used to be a perfectly horrendously difficult person to deal with in that respect.

Q: He was at that point the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. He was the head of INR at one time.

READ: He was first INR and then FE as it was called in those days.

Q: The control of paper, the control policy...There were obviously problems, but would there be a problem for you—for you personally to worry that you were being objective? Also, people within your organization maybe felt strongly about our position or

Library of Congress

something...trying to direct the proper train, or make sure it had a clear track. This type of thing.

READ: I think a good 50% of these jobs near the top of the Department are at least as much concerned with personal chemistry, quirks, strengths, weaknesses, as they are with other things. You pretty soon learn to measure people when you are dealing with them in a period of intensity and crisis.

I was helped in that respect by one event. I had only been the Executive Secretary for something like 3 weeks, Averell Harriman went over to get his final instructions from Kennedy on the test ban negotiations. Kennedy had made his speech at the American University which offered a test ban if the Soviets would follow suit. It was timely from both countries viewpoint to attempt this again. It had been tried two or three times abortively in the preceding five years. It caught Khrushchev at a receptive point, although this was only seven or eight months after the Cuban Missile Crisis. But the offer was picked up affirmatively by Khrushchev. Quite quickly. Harriman was asked to be head of the delegation. He was a wonderful choice because he was widely respected in the Soviet Union. He had been the wartime Ambassador in Moscow and many other things. Harriman came back from his last meeting with the President where he had gotten his instructions in effect to bring home the bacon. He said the President is passionately concerned that there not be any leaks on the to-ing and fro-ing by cable to Moscow while Averell was there. Harriman said Kennedy wanted the system to be set up which would involve five readers in all the government, and that I was to be the checkpoint. If there were leaks it could be easily identified who was at fault. I'd known Kennedy only slightly when I was working on the Hill. It started 10 days of an extraordinary experience on my part. I was literally the only staff Indian with five very big chiefs. I think we had as readers in the initial period only Rusk, Ball, McNamara, Bundy and one other. It expanded by two or three as it went along. But I had to live at the Department just to get these cables...to put a moniker on all the traffic called "BAN". Whenever the word "BAN" came up the communicators in the Department were instructed to call me and I would have to go down and get the rest of the

Library of Congress

message and handle it in the way required. I pretty soon found myself falling into a routine, having not only to make it accessible to the readers, they had to come to my office from the other agencies. It was quite embarrassing from my point of view and from theirs. Each evening I would attend a meeting with Kennedy and these five people, review the requests from the Harriman delegation about what was needed, what the issues were, demanding responses, of course, by morning when the negotiations would pick up again. There was a seven hour differential. So I'd go to these meetings and being the only serf in the crowd, would find myself preparing the agenda and draft instructions. I would often come back with draft changes in the instruction in my own squiggle sometimes from the President, or from the Secretaries, and try to reflect their intent. Then I would take a deep breath and sign off for the President, sign off for the Secretary of State, sign off for McNamara...and out they'd go. Happily it wasn't that complex an issue, so I never ran onto the rocks and shoals. It was a marvelous experience because it gave me very early insight into the President's enormous interest in international affairs. I had already seen that by the chits that would come to me from his office. Every night he would dictate before he would go to bed. And these little chits would be sent over by his secretary Mrs. Lincoln, and would end up on my desk, saying give me your best assessment on the center left coalition in Italy. Then you would have to farm it out, get it back, and send it over from the people who knew best. But the test Ban was a wonderful experience because he was determined to have it succeed, and it did succeed. If the negotiations had lasted 24 more hours I would have collapsed.

Q: Tell me about this relationship between Rusk and Kennedy. I've heard the story that Kennedy picked Rusk because the logical...Senator Fulbright or Averell Harriman...these were two powerful people, but he picked Rusk because he wanted someone who was a bureaucrat, or somebody who knew the way. How did you see this? Kennedy was going to be his own Secretary of State?

READ: Kennedy was far more interested in foreign affairs than he was in domestic affairs in my judgement. I don't know the origins of the appointment other than what little I've

Library of Congress

gleaned from conversations. Dean doesn't talk very much about it, except to say how surprised he was when he was asked. I have learned since from others that Bob Lovett may have been asked and rejected the job before the offer was made to Rusk, and possibly one other. I know that Rusk had been recommended by Acheson to Kennedy and that Kennedy was very much taken by an article he had written in Foreign Affairs on the importance of the role of the President in foreign affairs which had come out about the time of the election in '60. But in many ways it was a logical choice because he knew the Far East, he knew the UN from having been Assistant Secretary in both areas in the Truman administration, and from having been head of Rockefeller Foundation which dealt extensively with the developing world. He was a Rhodes Scholar and a person of many achievements.

Q: And in the test ban discussions the President was playing an active role. He didn't just say, I want a treaty and do this.

READ: There were a number of issues that came up in the course of those ten days. He'd go around the table and he was always very solicitous of Rusk's opinions. Rusk would sometimes leave the room with him at the end of the evening and would come back with the President's slant on specific issues to make it accord completely with the President's more refined views, and that sort of thing. It was a difficult relationship in other respects. Rusk was from Cherokee County, Georgia, not a Harvard man, not a New Englander, and had not been a personal adviser in 1960. Rusk had three people under him who were already appointed before he was—Adlai Stevenson, Averell Harriman, Soapy Williams, with vast experience in politics. Kennedy's own relationship with McGeorge Bundy was so simpatico, so close, that the press used to just assume that everyone else was secondary, but it wasn't. There was a very good relationship between Bundy and Rusk, one of mutual respect. But Rusk would never move an inch to correct any one of those heated stories about personal relationships. There was later, however, a more natural rapport with Johnson when he came in.

Library of Congress

Q: They were both sort of poor farm boys from the South.

READ: The Southern bond was real. Rusk had been very solicitous, as many others had not been, of Johnson when he was Vice President. There was a commonality there that was important.

Q: How about the Under Secretary at that point, George Ball, as you saw the relationship, and how he dealt with the Department. He in a way seemed to be the house liberal or something like that.

READ: George was a marvelous alter ego for the Secretary. Ball was in full charge when the Secretary was away on trips. They had an excellent personal relationship. Their views differed significantly only on Southeast Asian matters as the Vietnam War heated up, and even there it was a very civil relationship. Rusk knew that Ball felt differently, respected his views, encouraged him to put them forward to the President. There was no going around corners or any of that sort of thing. George's primary interests were Europe, where he had a rich background from work with Jean Monnet, his own experiences in World War II, and beyond during beginnings of what became the Community. That complemented Rusk, who had not had as much specialized European experience as George had. George had considerable economic competence which also helped a great deal in an area where Rusk was not too well grounded.

Q: I did an interview early on with William Tyler who said that whenever he came to Rusk about Europe, he said, "Why don't you talk to Ball." Well, just to understand the relationship, there was not the feeling that if Rusk was out of town, Ball was seizing the ball or going off. There was no tension?

READ: They were very close. I never felt any of that tension whatsoever between them.

Q: How about on Vietnam?

Library of Congress

READ: On Vietnam they differed.

Q: They may differ but as far as slant, when Rusk was out of town Ball was in charge.

READ: Ball was meticulous in not moving into areas that he knew Dean would not want him to go. I don't remember any period, even with the luxury of hindsight, that there were any incidents that had any significance whatever, where that could have been charged. I guess that when President Diem was assassinated, October of '63, the advance cable recognizing the coup to follow had gone out over Harriman's signature, I believe. Rusk was away and either George or Averell had talked to Rusk wherever he was and then talked to Kennedy. The issue was whether they had fully conveyed the problem to Rusk. Averell was very correct about those things too. There was probably very little misunderstanding.

Q: Nicholas Katzenbach. How did he work? This was later on.

READ: It was hard for him. Nick came in from '66 to '69. He had taught International Law at some point, and knew a great deal about International Affairs. He had been Deputy Attorney General at Justice for six years, and worked closely with Bobby Kennedy, and had been dealing with many, many different things. The top level officials of every administration after six years in office is used to dealing with each other on a personal plane, and in habits of doing things that they have fallen into. It was hard for Nick at first to find a place for himself in that lineup. There wasn't a natural slot, or spot that was readily apparent. But he soon created a very, very useful and constructive role for himself on Vietnam affairs. Even though Dean Rusk was thoroughly involved in that, any number of other things were always happening—Panama, Cyprus, the Dominican Republic. The world's problems went on relentlessly. Nick was a very different person than George Ball in many ways. The relationship with Rusk wasn't strained but it took a while to mesh.

Library of Congress

Q: One other person in this, a completely different type of work. A major figure in a field that I think is often overlooked is management, and that is William Crockett. He was Deputy Under Secretary for Management a good part of this time.

READ: If my recollection is correct, he had very little relationship with Rusk. When he had management problems that required a higher level decision, George Ball was the person he'd usually go to. That was pretty much the pattern that I can recall.

Q: Your job was a management job, but did it dovetail with this?

READ: Broad Department-wide concerns were not in my province as Executive Secretary when I wasn't dealing with ambassadorial appointments, personnel, or budget, except for the budget for the Executive Secretariat. The substantive paper flow was our principal concern, the information flow from all sources in terms of the fast breaking events. The 1963-69 period was jam packed with crises that seemed heart stopping at the time. I had 3 deputies and 3 sections under them with perhaps 110 people in all.

Q: How did you find dealing with the various geographic bureaus, and also some of the functional bureaus? These are like little Duchies in a feudal kingdom. Were there different characteristics? The role of personalities. They all must have been pounding on your gate saying, let me in. You must have had a very difficult time. How did you see these entities?

READ: Without any report cards, they were pretty soon assessed and evaluated by, and always are by the Secretary of State, and the Under Secretary, now called Deputy Secretary, and Executive Secretary, in terms of levels of competence. They get to know the Bureaus to different extents because of the relative importance, or unimportance, of the issues that are being dealt with within a given time. In the Kennedy/Johnson period the premier bureau in terms of competence was considered to be the European Affairs Bureau. It was just generally ceded that was so. I remember asking Rusk early on and late

Library of Congress

in his tenure—it always came out EUR first, Near East South Asia second, sometimes tied with Far East, with African Affairs and Inter-American Affairs rated below them.

Q: I came into the Foreign Service in 1955, and I have learned at least from people I have talked with, don't get into ARA. It is a third or fifth rate bureau. It's unfair, but it's something that becomes almost a gut instinct. Maybe it's self-fulfilling.

READ: When I came into the role in the Carter period I remember asking Vance the same question I had Rusk. The only change was that he rated NEA and EUR on a par in terms of the highest levels of competence. Which I think I would have too from a personal viewpoint, and at that point East Asia was suffering somewhat in the post Vietnam war period, but brought itself up by the bootstraps by the late seventies. But the same lower ranking was accorded to African Affairs and Inter-American Affairs.

Q: Did you find in this ranking, not just impressions, did it reflect itself if there were issues? Was there something on how they presented their cases which would really go to you as the door keeper, in order to get the Secretary's attention? To get them staffed out? Did you see this reflected that way too?

READ: To some degree, yes. But perhaps every bit as important, or more so, was whether the issues under consideration were of significance to the top ranks of government, or were dealt with at other areas. It's no discredit or anything else, to assert that the principal issues we were dealing with in those days were not in Africa or South America.

Q: I use this when I was with the Board of Examiners giving the oral exam. When Henry Kissinger said in his academic role one time, "South Africa is the dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica. Please explain." Any way this is a perception which is widely held. Did you see a change as time went on between your view and the relationship and your working with the White House, and the National Security Council when Kennedy was killed and Johnson came in?

Library of Congress

READ: Yes, quite a bit. At the very beginning of Lyndon Johnson's tenure, Mac Bundy was unsure of himself. He didn't have any background to speak of with Lyndon Johnson except as the special assistant to Kennedy would have had to any Vice President. They were about as far apart in personalities as you could visualize. The Department's only channel of communication to the new President in the first few days was through a Foreign Service Officer that had been assigned to the Vice President's office named Lee Stull. He was in effect our conduit for a few days to Johnson. When we had an enormous gathering of world leaders on the night of Kennedy's burial, the Secretariat had to prepare the cue cards for the President telling him in capsule form about the persons he was meeting and the principal problems involved. The level of detail was vastly different than what would have been given to Kennedy. It wasn't to say that Johnson hadn't traveled a great deal during his Congressional, majority leader, and Vice Presidential days. He had a lot of experience with some of the leaders, but his interest in foreign affairs was much less than Kennedy's at first. Johnson's primary virtuoso capabilities were in the domestic area. The Department had to learn to communicate with him in a different way. Quite early on, I suggested to Rusk trying a one sheet evening reading for the President. He wasn't as voracious a reader as Kennedy had been by a long shot. With all the imperfections of what you have to tell the President at the end of the day, from the Department of State, what should you tell him about what has happened, or what was likely to break tomorrow, with some sense of priority and avoiding trivia. You never felt satisfied with the product. Ask a Bureau for a paragraph on relations with country X, and they are horrified, but you have to say, "well, you can have that or nothing." You learned that there is a whole level between reporting and editing and editing of editing and editing of editing of editing. The synthesis process requires different skills at different levels. And yet this worked, it was the last thing I'd get signed by the Secretary at the end of each day. Sometimes he'd have a chance to dictate one of the paragraphs but usually it was something we'd get put together for him based on what came up which we had edited.

Q: So it was just a one page?

Library of Congress

READ: One or two pages at most. I remember as the Vietnam War wore on and got worse and worse, I asked the Secretary whether he would let me append a notation at the end about new appearance of scheduled U.S. operational escalations as they might be seen from the North Vietnamese, Chinese, or Soviet perspective of the Vietnam War. Often these bombing runs would extend further North and you had to visualize the level of concern that that might provoke by purposely attempting to put yourself in their shoes. And we kept this up until 1969. Sometimes the President's evening reading resulted in canceling operations which conflicted with diplomatic initiatives with the potential of embarrassment.

I remember having a close working relationship with Paul Nitze, who was the Deputy Secretary of Defense during this period. Because we had forty seven political advisers at CINCPAC and in the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon I would sometimes be able to call Paul late in the day and say, "Paul, do you and Bob McNamara realize that you are hitting at a new high today or tomorrow on numbers of raids, or geography, or whatever it might have been at the same time we were trying to mount a negotiating initiative in London or Moscow." Sometimes they would be horrified because they simply hadn't known it or thought of it from an adversarial perspective, and on occasion they changed, modified or canceled operations as a result.

President Johnson established a Tuesday lunch routine to meet and to decide matters with the Secretaries of State and Defense. The agenda would usually include several foreign affairs issues. It was a compatible way of doing business from LBJ's point of view. All Presidents have different styles. But it was a hell of a thing to prepare for at a staff level because if you didn't watch out you'd had a full phone book of issues to be dealt with. I got into the habit of talking to Bromley Smith or Bundy, and later Rostow's NSC staff and Joe Califano or his successor at Defense to put together the agenda for those meetings. And I would brief the Secretary after we'd gotten this stuff up from the Bureau, giving abstracts as well as heftier material backup. After the luncheon I would ask Rusk for a debriefing to

Library of Congress

learn what follow-up was needed. I pretty soon learned to also get a debrief from Defense and from the White House. All too often I would find to my horror three totally different accounts of what the President had agreed to or not agreed to, thought he'd put in train or not put in train. You began to realize how easily different perceptions arise from a nod, an acknowledgment, or to hearing something because you want to hear something.

Q: What you were saying just now about your getting Rusk to agree to let you put a little paragraph about the North Vietnamese...in a way this is a very important policy. If you're going to the top man and there's been criticism. People pleased with the fact that we didn't let the war go all out. Our American military say if you bomb the next bridge everything will change. More is better. And then there are others saying we hold back the military. Was this just an idea or your side or conscious effort to micro-manage and keep the military from running away with the game?

READ: It certainly wasn't a brilliant flash of insight because time after time in the early diplomatic efforts we'd find that the military track and the diplomatic track were badly at odds. Resuming bombing of North Vietnam when Kosygin was there was a perfectly asinine thing to do, understandably resented by the Russians. It was grotesque. So it didn't take much wit to realize that you wanted to put these two tracks together at the highest level. I was delighted that very late in the Johnson period, the President thanked me for doing so and said it had been useful and thanked me for the role I'd had in the evening reading generally.

Q: Weren't you getting from Califano in Defense, saying cut this out, you're screwing us up?

READ: No. The evening reading went straight to the President without change through his National Security Assistant. If it didn't, the President would ask for it. Then you'd get it back with little marginal notations by the President on something he'd told Bundy or Rostow in the morning briefings. So it was a very privileged sort of document.

Library of Congress

Q: What was your impression...did you have dealings with the Pentagon, their effectiveness and all? Because you say you are comparing notes, and you have your agenda, and they have theirs. How did you mesh, or not?

READ: You began to realize what a mouse State was compared to the Defense elephant in terms of bodies. But sometimes you had an advantage as a mouse. When we had to crank out a paper by midnight or the next morning, it would be done. The Department could do that sort of thing. If you asked the National Military Command Center for such a product, it would put 35 people in an uproar. If they could produce in time it would be so footnoted and committeeized, you could barely recognize the thought. Or the services would have different viewpoints. So you found that State had the advantage frequently, and at the same time you learned an enormous respect for Defense. It was a Ball/Vance arena that I remember writing the specs for a personnel exchange between the Operations Center and the NMCC, when Cy Vance was Deputy Secretary of Defense. It proved immensely useful because we could get a military insight into things we didn't understand when we needed it in a hurry. And on a regular basis the military officers at State would insert things of intent into the Operations Center daily summary for the Secretary. They served in many ways which facilitated an essential information flow in both directions. They didn't make as good a use of the Foreign Service Officers at the Pentagon because of their huge bureaucracy, and the NMCC was far removed from the Secretary of Defense's office. We could never get them assigned in a more useful position at Defense.

Q: How about with the NSC. What was your impression of how they operated at that time? Or maybe there is a difference between the Kennedy...your mentioning that it took a little while for Bundy to adjust to Kennedy.

READ: But he adjusted, being such a quick study, very quickly.

Q: Walt Rostow. He came in...

Library of Congress

READ: I knew Walt. I liked him and I still do personally, but he had a mental filter that would make him an advocate where he should not have been. He would see North Vietnamese trucks on the move in a picture taken from airplanes or space, and he would assume they were going south fully loaded. It was an inset, a bias, an unconscious assumption by him. Toward the end of the Johnson period, he was often out of step with most persons at State and Defense. But he served the President night and day and the President never lost faith in him. And he was also close to Secretary Rusk.

Q: You mean about the concern, the deterioration?

READ: Walt had a mental strainer. He would pass on information to the President that built up or corroborate the theories that he'd evolved. He was a theorist, a conceptual theorist, and that was his background in the academic world. It became a very trying relationship for the Department and agencies.

Q: It's always very difficult for all of us who were at the time, but you were there during the build up and where things really looked bad in the Vietnam War. How did you see this from your perspective? How did the organism you saw was reacting? I realize this was hindsight.

READ: It's so easy to gloss over your own lack of understanding twenty- five years later. I guess I was impressed very early on, I couldn't begin to date it, that World War II lessons were being applied to a situation totally different, in which we had minimal understanding of the history, culture and the societies we were dealing with. It came home to me in several ways when a book came out by a French author on Dien Bien Phu.

Q: Ray. First he did Street Without Joy and then he did Dien Bien Phu.

READ: The latter provided a rich background about the three kingdoms and their endless animosities and their Chinese struggles. It was news to most of us. It was sad and lamentable, and this was way beyond the time when we should have known that

Library of Congress

information intimately before we became fully engaged in the way we did. Dean Rusk and many others had sharp recollections of the pre-World War II period and the danger of succumbing to aggression on the part of the dictators.

Q: We're talking the Munich period, the appeasement.

READ: Some would speak in terms of the Soviet bloc long after the China- Soviet split and would talk in terms of aggression when you were dealing with a civil situation measured in a very different set of circumstances. So it was a humbling experience. I think it was 1966 or 1967 for example, when we were parsing painfully one of these North Vietnamese peace overtures or soundings. All of them proved to be pretty thin gruel. We were struggling with what various clauses related back to. That late in the game, '66, '67, we learned for the first time that there weren't any commas in the Vietnamese language. That's kind of fundamental you know.

I remember helping in a small way George Ball write the briefs against the major investment of troops and resources, which Dean Rusk knew that I was doing. He said, if you feel that way by all means help George. Rusk was that big a person. A lot of others would not have allowed an aide to do it.

Q: Did you have a feeling that after a while...how about you and the other officers around you who were seeing this stuff coming in, particularly the OPS Center—a feeling of just being caught up in, doing your job and the enthusiasm and the support was just wearing thin? Or was there a spirit going on?

READ: I guess the low point in my mind was when Vietnam was raging and we had two other crises simultaneously—Panama, Cyprus, and the Dominican Republic. And I remember Johnson calling a 2:00 A.M. meeting at the White House on the Dominican Republic where the U.S. was trying to suggest the makeup of a Dominican Cabinet. Not one of them knew the figures they were dealing with except second or third hand. And you saw the very close limits of fatigue making the system almost inoperative. Different

Library of Congress

levels of misunderstanding would occur. Johnson...I remember Johnson handed me a new draft of a cable to send to Ellsworth Bunker in the Dominican Republic. He handed it to the Secretary, and the Secretary had it sent, as you did in those days by this primitive slow FAX or messenger, I don't remember which, to be typed in final form for encryption and transmission. In about 30 minutes the President asked for Bunker's answer. Of course, that cable hadn't gotten close to Ellsworth. I said it probably hasn't gotten to him yet, so the President phoned Bunker in the clear and asked him for his views. Well Ellsworth was an old hand and he would listen to this gush from Washington, and in his Vermont way would say, Yup, Yup, Yup. And you knew damn well he wasn't going to do a bloody thing because the instruction didn't make sense. All sorts of vignettes of that sort come back to mind.

Q: Were you sensing sort of an unease from the officers working for you? Morale towards this. Everybody just doing their job.

READ: They were doing their job. Doing it extraordinarily well, with few exceptions.

Q: What about the Tet offensive? This was '68, February '68, hit you.

READ: It hit the Department like a thunderclap. It was just unfathomable that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese could have got as far as they did in so many different parts of the country, and taken over so much real estate, almost including the U.S. Embassy. There was great impatience within the Department and the country at large with the military view which was factually correct that the North had suffered a tremendous drainage of their strength and would be incapable for a while of doing much in a sustained military nature. There was so little appreciation of that viewpoint or of the immense psychological erosion had occurred. It was a shockeroo.

Library of Congress

Q: Were you involved at all in the conference of the Wise Men? When Westmoreland asked for, we had a half million troops there and the ante was raised another quarter of a million.

READ: I don't remember that being the focus. Well yes, it was the focus of the second Wise Men meeting. We staffed those meetings when they were briefed initially in the State Department. When they had had their discussions in the State Department they would meet privately with the President. I had great skepticism about the procedure of the elder statesman being used as a group. These were honorable people, who were very pleased to be asked their opinion, but initially they were fearful of going against the mainstream of opinion. And long after the writing was on the wall, their advice was still very ordinary. It was only things like the Westmoreland troop request, Tet, etc., that brought them to face reality very late in the game. Of course, you have to realize that Johnson was an intimidating character to give advice to when he did not want to hear it.

Q: Did you have the feeling that Johnson was...that there was an overriding feeling on Johnson's part that he didn't want to be known as the President who lost Vietnam, or something, so that everything sort of stemmed from this? Or was there a geo-political feeling on Johnson's part? From what you were seeing.

READ: For me to report that I knew Johnson's mind is ridiculous. I saw him at various times during this long sequence but my feeling was he just couldn't conceive of this country losing in that situation. He did not have an appreciation of how high the obstacles were until they were painfully obvious, and really until domestic realities were making that clear more than anything else. He didn't think in broad geo-political terms as some other Presidents did.

Q: Did this become apparent to Rusk? Or was Rusk willing to keep going?

Library of Congress

READ: If it did, he never ever would have indicated that to anyone else. He just was that sort of person.

Q: There is much—but I don't want to overtax you on this. Johnson in '68 said he wasn't going to run. And then there was the Humphrey/Nixon campaign. Was there much cooperation when the Nixon crew took over? In the State Department, from your point of view, or was this a hostile takeover? Or how did this work out?

READ: I was appointed, whatever the title was, for transition, so I saw quite a bit of it. I think it was done quite well. I remember comparing notes much later with Elliot Richardson, who is an old friend, and he's always rated it as I have, as one of the most civil transitions between parties that had occurred, unlike 1980.

Q: Which was a hostile takeover.

READ: Sophomoric. There was very full disclosure, offerings of briefings. When Bill Rogers and Dean Rusk met repeatedly. Unlike Secretary Baker and Secretary Shultz. We gave them an office right on the seventh floor, yards away from the Secretary's office where Bill Leonhart and the Under Secretary of the Eisenhower period, the famous diplomat, Bob Murphy, were putting together the personnel for State. Henry Kissinger had run a Vietnam peace initiative for LBJ and I knew Henry quite well. I went up to the Hotel Pierre to see him a few times and I don't think it could have been handled much more gracefully than it was, although I'm sure there were glitches at different levels.

Q: Did you have the feeling that here were people who were really very serious? You had a President who was somewhat the mirror of Kennedy, who really thought of himself as being a foreign affairs President. Did you?

READ: You certainly got that sense from Kissinger. I didn't see Nixon during this period. I saw some of his staff who became notorious during that time. The State Department's whole transition team was very effective and had entre anywhere they wanted. They got

Library of Congress

just as full briefings as they desired. There had been briefings during the campaign of Nixon or his designees. The transition was pretty well done I think.

Q: To move on, you had spent some time...but we will stick to the State Department side. When the Nixon/Ford administration left you came in right from the beginning, first as a Deputy, and then as the Under Secretary for Management.

READ: Well, first I stayed about a month into the Nixon period at the beginning, and Bill Rogers asked me to stay but I said I was tired blood and left.

Q: I would imagine.

READ: Jumping ahead to the Carter period, I had known Cy Vance well and he asked me during that transition period to come in at the start as the Under Secretary—Technology, Oceans and Science and Technology. I didn't think I had the right credentials for that and I was running a foundation. I said they could do better than me for that job. They asked me again a little later to take on an Ambassadorship, and it wasn't something I would have been very appropriate for in terms of the country. They called a third time and my conscience was really bugging me, and asked me to take on this management job which had started out under Dick Moose during the first four or five months of the administration. By then Dick had taken on African Affairs which was his primary interest.

Q: You did this during the Carter years. What was the job? What did it involve?

READ: The management job, as it had evolved at that point, was in order personnel, money and administration. These three areas within the Department headed by Assistant Secretary level officers were your principal deputies. You had your own management staff as well, but they were the three principal parts of the job. It was a totally new experience for me although earlier experience in the Department helped. I came in when the endless controversy over the Department's charter and the relationship of the Foreign Service to the Department was again at a boil for the umpteenth time. There was enormous

Library of Congress

impatience within the Department and in Congress about the obsolescence of the 1946 Foreign Service Act. It had acquired so many oddball amendments, hundreds by that time. It had gaps and contradictions in terms. My first big assignment was to try to reach conclusions on what could and should be done about that. It took about 10,000 hours during the next four years. Of course, there were also endless problems of appointments; personnel, ambassadorships, appropriation, etc.

Q: Well you came at a time too, when everybody was looking at the fine print because the lawyers were taking over the...there were all sorts of suits. Concerning minorities, concerning the role of women, so that every assignment, every promotion and all was almost a legal one.

READ: Well yes and no. There were lawsuits pending and they had been pending for a long time. They were progressing. Vance and I were very simpatico with doing something about these long standing issues. Rusk had made a very strenuous effort in the '60s to do something but the percentage of minority officers, percentage of women officers, a lack of diversity in background were really outrageous in a dozen and one different ways. We were carving off some of the very richness of the society in terms of the Service's representational capabilities. It was a very tough slog to do much about that, but in the four years of the Administration minorities in the Foreign Service were doubled and women increased by 50 or 60 percent.

Q: Looking at it as you saw the Foreign Service at the time in '77. When you came in, the Foreign Service Act was under fire; that the women were under represented, the minorities were under represented. Was this a fault of society or was this a fault of the Foreign Service?

READ: Very much of the Foreign Service. The efforts, not through malevolence, but through the momentum of old ways of doing things, just weren't giving as much attention—just to take the women issue—to verbal skills as they were to spatial mathematics

Library of Congress

which men had an edge on in most of the testing procedures. The recruiting efforts when you look at them in detail were not really strenuous at all in terms of trying to interest minorities, who were very much in demand elsewhere. Those who had higher education had many different offers when they left good schools.

Q: Speaking sort of in the private world.

READ: It was a very tough sell. I am not saying that nothing had been accomplished in the past, but the efforts were very lukewarm and there were real impediments within the system which were bad in every respect. The worst personnel problem we found was a huge senior overglut and a massive amount of departures in middle ranks of top flight promising young officers, who just simply looked at this huge inverted pear above them and said, "how can you possibly ask me to wait X years for advancement?" The senior rank rules which had become so sloppy you could spend, once you became a Career Minister, that was your last evaluation. You could become fat, complacent and bide times. You could get hopelessly out of date. I'd seen Kennedy, and I saw Carter too, go through the first pages of names on those senior lists and say, Who is this, what has he, that person, done who is up there? They just couldn't believe what had happened. There were 22 years permitted with FSO (?) before an "out" order was given. (?)

Some FSOs had literally never served abroad. At the same time the Department was still trying to push its Civil Service people into the Foreign Service. It was painfully obvious to me after a short reacquaintance with the Department that that wasn't going to happen. In the years since a ruling has been promulgated by Bill Macomber when he was Under Secretary for Management to lead to a unified single Foreign Service in the Department, the ratio of Civil Servants and Foreign Service Officers has remained about the same. These were Civil Service people who the Department relied on heavily who would never agree to serve abroad and should not have been asked to do so. Their competence was where they were. And as I said, there were Foreign Service Officers who served only in the United States. It was a mish-mash system. It was terrible. All of the problems of the

Library of Congress

Foreign Service Act, and there have been many of implementation and thinning out to restore some sort of pyramid or up or out system fell heavily on George Vest and Ron Spiers and others in the early '70s. But the problems which were corrected in 1980 were very serious as well. We had the good fortune to have Dante Fascell on the Hill as chair of the Subcommittee dealing with the matter. He was extremely conscientious and a most able legislator and gave word- by-word examination to the new Act. In part the 1980 Act was dictated by the Civil Service Reform Act of '78. There was a real possibility that Congress would put the Foreign Service into the Civil Service unless the Department reformed itself. This was not fully appreciated within the Department. Such a move would have been crippling to our diplomatic service, but we had to conform in many respects with what the rest of the public service was doing under the 1978 Act. We couldn't just go marching off in a different direction. So those were some of the dynamics behind the way the 1980 Act came out.

Q: How about...one of the major things that came about...did you get involved in the hostage crisis?

READ: Indeed I did.

Q: We're talking about the Iranian takeover of our Embassy, November of '79. That lasted for 144 days.

READ: And in February of '79 an earlier takeover occurred that lasted a short while and then was resolved, but only temporarily until the fall. I was involved in every step of that, in terms of the people—the families—and the human side of the event. I had assigned some of those officers there. That was the country to which I had been asked to become Ambassador.

Q: Yesterday I interviewed Walt Cutler who talks about his being turned down by the Iranians. He was about set to go out there.

Library of Congress

READ: Yes, that was at a later date. My earlier negative response was the best “no” I ever said in my life. I saw the impact the hostage families had on President Carter. He had great empathy towards them. I was there at the very end of the administration when Khomeini released them minutes after the transition occurred to Reagan. I went over with Vance to meet them in Wiesbaden and debrief them.

Q: Your being involved, did you have the feeling that this was tying the hands of the American government and in particular the Carter administration? Was it getting them involved? Because after all some of these people I knew too. But I mean we're talking about 55 or so people. And having the whole United States being wrapped around, and particularly the American government and the presidency being wrapped around this. Was this...

READ: There's no doubt about it. That happened. And there is no doubt in my mind either, that the Department couldn't have stopped that from happening, if it had the most fiendishly clever plan imaginable. The media wasn't going to let it happen. It was front page hot media stuff. And I don't think you could possibly have a case example where the power of the media in foreign affairs was more dramatic than that. The day-by- day TV coverage of the affair had a great impact.

Q: How about the...this has now become a cause celebre, but were you sort of stuck with the sort of the Moscow Embassy business. I always think of this, the Embassy was being built and we discovered at a certain point that the thing was so bugged that we couldn't use it. (tea break) We're talking about our Embassy in Moscow which we started building, the contracts were let during the Nixon period which I guess you were very happy.

READ: Very.

Q: But it turned out that we did not have whatever it was we allowed the Soviet intelligence service to build what amounted to a sounding building. I mean anything that was

Library of Congress

happening could be...it was built into the system. I wonder if you could describe what happened? How this developed as you saw it, and what you inherited?

READ: For all the security problems that were undoubtedly created, they had a very humorous side from where I saw it. Before the new building became an issue, one relating to the period in '79-'80. Mac Toon was our Ambassador then, and he was back in Washington when the news came in that the Soviets had been tuning in directly on the Ambassador's office by a hidden process that had probably been there for a long time. I went down to see Mac and asked, "How do you think this was done?" He said, "I can't imagine, I can't imagine. We've checked everything, we've checked everything." So we called for the building plans of the existing Embassy which is a horrible old building and we looked to see where the Soviet listening capability could be coming from. I remember spotting a little chimney on a flat deck outside the Ambassador's office and saying, "Where does this come from?" And he said, "I have no idea." And that's where the darn thing was. The chimney went right straight down to the sub ground level and through a tunnel to its base. A KGB agent had come each morning and cranked up a clothes line on which they had a receiver set at the level of the roof and tuned in to whatever they could hear in the Ambassador's office. I never thought it was quite as disastrous as the security theorists. They were used to being careful in that Embassy, and they would conduct all conversations of any great sensitivity in a secure inside tank. But Toon was outraged and didn't know how that could have happened. I was in Moscow just a short time later and asked to see the thing. And there it was, this little Rube Goldberg clothes line that would come up every morning. I talked to the Seabee, once the bug had been discovered, who had been asked to secure the tunnel. When they had gone down and seen the tunnel it was not manned at the time. They scrambled back up and said, "What do we do?" The instruction was to secure the tunnel. So they started pushing wads of stuff into the tunnel. They were in the process of doing this with their miner's lamps on when the KGB fellows turned the corner at the other end with his own little miner's cap and they were looking like two moles looking at each other from a distance of about 10 yards. I don't know which

Library of Congress

side was more frightened. Of course, we immediately closed the tunnel and dug a trench that went far deeper than this thing did all around the perimeter of the building. Toon, who was never short of positive opinions, was certain that this should have never have been allowed to happen to him.

Q: Was there construction going on, or did this happen later on at our Embassy?

READ: I remember as early as 1963 being stuck in an elevator in that horrible old building with Rusk and our then Ambassador, Foy Kohler. I always thought Foy staged it to show how awful the building was. The construction for the new Embassy was about to begin when the chimney event occurred and there was a deep hole in the ground at the new site and there was construction debris all over the back yard of the old Embassy under which this tunnel to the chimney ran.

Q: In your work in management, how far did you find...you said that on the Foreign Service Act that Dante Fascell, a Congressman from Florida, gave you great support. How about the rest of the buildings, and all this? I mean, with Congress, what was the relationship with Congress?

READ: It was. The House was far better than the Senate.

Q: That's surprising.

READ: They have time, they have fewer committee assignments. They do their homework thoroughly. Dante Fascell happens to be one of the top two or three craftsmen of legislature on the Hill. And he was Chairman of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee which handled the State Department authorization bill. On the appropriation side it was then, and still is, under chairman Neil Smith, an upright, straightforward fellow. And there were good ranking members on both of these subcommittees. The Senate side was a little bit quirkier. Fritz Hollings was the chairman and Wiecker was the ranking member on the appropriations side. On the Foreign Relations Committee it was Chairman Claiborne Pell

Library of Congress

in charge. They didn't have subcommittees in those days, so you dealt with the Senate at the full committee level. And they always had the spottiest sort of a feeling for the issues. But it was a great improvement from the days when Rooney used to tyrannize over the Department in the '60s.

Q: How was the...you must have particularly after the Embassy takeover and in Iran and all the other incidents that happened. The problem of terrorism must have spent a great deal of your money. I was overseas and we were getting all armored up and running consular sections which was my job was just God awful, because it was hard to do human business through two inch plexiglass.

READ: Well, we saw the beginnings of that in dramatic form in the Carter period. The tensions in the Middle East were real. I think we had more than 1500 Foreign Service Officers' family members off post because of security reasons when the Middle East was at white hot levels at one time. The threats were real. And some of our overseas buildings are hopelessly situated, as you well know. You know what the ideal security arrangement would be. At the same time I think what has happened in the intervening years has become maniacal. It has become preposterous to think you can make little armed fortresses out of every one of these buildings. I remember going on an assignment to Tegucigalpa at Secretary Shultz's request a year and a half ago and found to my horror that there were 500 plus people working on security matters, including the contractors at that time. Five hundred people in that little place. And none of them had anticipated the riots that happened before my visit there. The security theorists went to extremes I think after the Moscow disclosures and the Reagan period debacle of the Marine barracks disaster and all that. Perfect security is unobtainable. The move today to tear down the new Embassy building in Moscow is absurdly wasteful. Minor adaptations would suffice.

Q: Looking back on my work where I served in Yugoslavia for five years, there's damned little that really is secret. And the idea that dealing with local employees you knew what you could talk about, and you also got feedback from these people and the more

Library of Congress

Americans you put into a place the more of a problem you have. More chances of drunkenness, the more family problems, kidnapping. Anything you can think of comes from this. It is a sort of cover-your-ass-operation. Was this beginning to affect you at that time?

READ: Yes. But also saw the Congressional outrage as useful because we were in some disgracefully bad crummy old buildings here and there that needed replacing. We needed an infusion of funding for the Foreign Building Operation unit and got it as a result. That unit had been corrupted by that awful Congressman from Ohio, Wayne Hayes.

Q: This was a federal building reparation wasn't it? Which had become his little fief. Full of his creatures.

READ: It was a vile setup during his period. Then we got a qualified professional who had been the head of the American Institute of Architects and had long experience in the area. A person of complete integrity. And we were able to utilize the widespread security concern, which was perfectly legitimately based in many instances to good advantage to do what had long been needed. But security considerations have become excessive in my judgement.

Q: You had two Secretaries of State; first Cyrus Vance and then Edmund Muskie. Vance had asked you. What was his operating, how did you see him as Secretary of State?

READ: In terms of style?

Q: Style.

READ: Cy is a gentleman through and through. A completely honorable person. He had a great deal going for him when he was appointed Secretary of State. He had, after all, been involved in all sorts of overseas missions and had been Deputy Secretary of Defense. Hubert Humphrey told me once he would have been his choice as the Secretary of Defense if he had been elected. And he kept in touch during the Nixon/Ford years with a

Library of Congress

lot of foreign contacts. But he didn't anticipate the problems that Brzezinski created for him nearly sufficiently, and only painfully came to realize how he was being undercut by this man.

Q: Could you explain a bit? Brzezinski was the National Security Advisor at that time.

READ: Brzezinski had been a member of the policy planning council in the '60s for a year, but he had never really had any experience in government other than that one year. He had high ego, and sublime confidence in his own views. Unfortunately he felt his own views were usually superior to those of the Foreign Service and the State Department. His arrogance grew during his four years there. The NSC that he set up was a far less competent operation than it had been under Bundy, although much bigger in size.

Q: In what manner was it not competent? People?

READ: Caliber of people. Pure and simple. They had their own theories largely from academic life and weren't well versed with government.

Q: My feeling is that Henry Kissinger, who had many of the same attributes as Brzezinski, knew how to co-opt the best and the brightest from the Foreign Service.

READ: Indeed he did, and he sought judgments widely on the people he appointed. And let's face it, he was a hell of a lot more able than Brzezinski. Brzezinski served a very destructive role in my books during that period. He'd gotten to know and serve Carter in the trilateral commission in the mid seventies when Carter needed credentials on the international front. Zbig is a person of many ideas but one out of four or five of the ideas might be good and a lot of them would be dangerously wrong. Carter told me that personally after his administration was over. Vance believed that they had worked together during the campaign and differences could be handled as two grown-up human beings in a decent way. He wasn't and it became a great problem for the Administration.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you...I mean were you seeing any effects of this yourself?

READ: Well, no. The NSC had minimal contact with Management at State. Mostly OMB was the agency we were dealing with. It didn't hinder or hurt us in any way in that end of the building.

Q: Again coming back to subject I asked before, but in dealing with the various bureaus, mainly the geographic bureaus, were you finding any major change taking place as far as how they dealt with management and how they responded?

READ: In terms of substance at this point, the Near East South Asia Bureau had really developed an extraordinarily high degree of competence. The Bureau had a couple of extremely able Assistant Secretaries in Roy Atherton and Hal Saunders. They'd proved their mettle in their careful preparations for Camp David and the follow through of that extremely difficult negotiation. Again in the hostage crises the Bureau was as on top of things as you could possibly ask. It had grown in stature considerably since the sixties; more than the other bureaus.

Q: Coming back to the hostage situation. You saw this thing develop. Did you see the original hostage situation as a failure in what's called the Foreign Service establishment? Or was this just something that happened?

READ: I guess no one is absolved of a degree of blame in the event. Plainly the Shah made it extremely difficult to have contact with the religious world of the Muslim fanatics or anyone he viewed as his opposition. His SAVAK was omnipresent.

Q: SAVAK being the secret police.

READ: You did that at your peril if you were in the Embassy. And yet there was a pretty fair degree of realization in the Embassy about the deteriorating position of the Shah as he entered into his 35th year of power. He had lost contact in all sorts of ways with his

Library of Congress

country; trends and developments. The situation was greatly compounded by Washington because President Carter with Brzezinski's advice was just determined not to hear anything bad about the Shah. There were White House loud noises if a cable came in of criticism of the Shah and the diminishing outlook for him. So that didn't help one bit in terms of gaining an early appreciation of how fast things were unraveling.

Q: You in your position in Management, was there ever a time when the question came "should we get the hell out of there?" I mean I'm talking...there had been that one abortive takeover in February of '79 which lasted a couple of days, if I recall. But was there ever a management sort of judgement of what to do about this thing there?

READ: There was a determination by the government, not just the management of the State Department, to not beat a retreat. There were 25,000 Americans in the country. You just couldn't pack up. At the same time we did appreciate the severity of the situation. We didn't have a full Ambassador at the time of the takeover. There were no dependents there. It was not handled well at the Washington end at all. I have great sympathy for Bill Sullivan's complaints. Bill had a way of expressing things in a very sharp way, perhaps irritating unnecessarily Presidential eyes and ears. And certainly his Presidential assistant's eyes and ears. He may have been a little late in coming in with the clear warnings, but they did come in.

Q: Looking back on this, how might have things been handled better? You know...it's obviously hindsight.

READ: In '72-'73 the Shah asked for and received almost a blank check from this country on military equipment.

Q: I think this was when Kissinger and Nixon went there on a side trip from Russia. And they dropped by there and some people said it was almost like the Rover Boys. They said, "Gee, anything you want?" It was almost gratuitous.

Library of Congress

READ: It was a very fulsome visit and led to that open key to the treasury and to arms, which was not well or wisely used by the Shah in any way, shape or form. He was an increasingly ill man. Power corrupts anybody and it had corrupted him. There plainly were some basic errors made at that point. We could have insisted on having contact with a broader slice of Iranian society, but it's very hard to second guess with any feeling of conviction.

Q: Very hard to think. Given all our hindsight I'm not sure how much one could have talked, getting Foreign Service Officers out to talk, to the Ayatollahs and what would you have learned. Except maybe to know when to get the hell out of there completely, which would not be what we want to do.

READ: Since we are winding up, I might spend a few moments on Ed Muskie's short tenure. I think Ed would have been a great Secretary of State if he had had a longer tenure in office. I'd never seen a politician in that office. There had not been one since Hull. Well Herter had been a governor of Massachusetts, but he was also a short period Secretary and did not have the standing with Eisenhower that Muskie had with Carter. Muskie found the Department pushing water up hill on several issues with the Senate and the Congress to which he said, "Just forget it. You can't win this under any circumstances. Use your energies better elsewhere." He knew his was apt to be a short term assignment because the polls indicated that, and he picked well the subjects to get briefed on in depth. He held long Saturday substantive briefing sessions. He chose six or seven major issues and got thoroughly engaged with them. He showed a fine ability to elicit differing points of view, conflicting points of view, and sort through them well. He could hold his own. When you look around at the universe of Foreign Ministers, certainly the large majority of those of importance we deal with are parliamentarians.

Q: Which means politicians, of course.

Library of Congress

READ: He could talk their language. The other Secretaries that I knew could not do that as well. For instance, in an early meeting with Gromyko, he said our reaction to Afghanistan had knocked Salt II off the rails. Gromyko said that Salt II wouldn't have gone anywhere in the U.S. Senate. Muskie said, "now wait a minute, I was a member of the leadership of the Senate. We started out on the Panama situation with 2/3 of the country against us on what we were trying to do on the treaty with only 1/3 of the Senate for us. We persisted and won that issue. The leadership had made a firm decision to spend as much time as need by on Salt II which was popular in the country and had a 2/3 popular support level." To respond Muskie said, "Don't try to tell me that. I know better." Well, that is the type of world. I always regretted that Ed didn't have more time to show his stuff in office.

Q: To sort of close this off, could you talk about the transition. You went through one transition and how Reagan won the election in 1980, so in 1981, on January 20, 1980 the Reagan administration came in with Alexander Haig as Secretary Designate. How did that work?

READ: We saw trouble signs almost immediately. There had been transition teams, huge ones, formed about the time of the election or immediately thereafter or even designated before, I've forgotten which. And they were filled with young men who were ideologically motivated in terms of the rightness of the conservative causes. They had minimal knowledge of the world and no inclination to take time to learn. They came in with a vast chunk of preconceptions. Their transition recommendations were thin, thin gruel. They were really pap, a lot of them. A number of Republicans have since agreed. They were finally discarded by Haig without much ado. But many of their members were brassy, foolish, and didn't attempt to learn, as the Nixon people had when they came in. They knew it all. Minimal contacts with the Department were the order of the day. Haig didn't show up until about three days before the inauguration.

Q: Your impression he made no effort to sort of control this.

Library of Congress

READ: No, which you would think he would have because he was an old hand at government. I'd dealt with him when he was staff assistant to McNamara or Vance way back in the '60s. I don't think he became engaged until well into January. Then a lot of silly things were going on. So it was an inept transition. One that, I think, ill-served the country.

End of interview